Chapter XI

Pushing the Envelope: Designing Authentic Learning Activities Using Course Management Systems

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Abstract

This chapter describes how course management systems (CMS) can be utilized to support learner-centered practices and meaningful learning in distributed or online learning environments. Specifically, the chapter provides: (1) a pedagogically-oriented classification of the features and components of CMS enabling the online course developer to comprehensively understand the pedagogical potential of a CMS; and (2) a framework that explicitly demonstrates how to design authentic learning tasks using the features and components of CMS to create course designs and distributed learning interactions that engage students in meaningful learning.
Introduction

Recent advances in Internet and Web-based technologies have redefined the boundaries and interactional pedagogies of traditional face-to-face classroom learning by stretching its scope and deepening its interconnectedness (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005). New learning interactions that were not perceived possible before can now be facilitated, such as the coupling of experts from around the world with novices, the instantaneous access to global resources, the opportunity to publish to a world audience, the opportunity to take virtual field trips, the opportunity to communicate with a diverse audience, and the ability to share and compare information, negotiate meaning, and co-construct knowledge. These types of learning interactions can be described as distributed forms of interactions because they are distributed across space, time, and various media. They are also perceived as tools or activities that promote higher-order thinking, enhance social learning skills such as communication and collaboration, and sustain motivation in distance education settings (Navarro & Shoemaker, 2000).

Distributed forms of interactions can be used to supplement face-to-face instructional activities, bringing to the forefront an important distinction between a traditional course and the notion of “distributed course events” or a “distributed course” that holds complex challenges for the course designer (Dede, 1996; Dabbagh, 2000). A distributed course can be defined as a course in which one or more of the instructional events that traditionally have occurred in the classroom are distributed to learners so that they may occur while learners are separated by either time or space from one another and the course instructor (Locatis & Weisberg, 1997). Learning can therefore occur at the same time in different places (e.g., through scheduled video conferencing events), at different times in the same place (e.g., meeting face-to-face in the classroom to attend guest lecturers), or at different times in different places (e.g., using e-mail to communicate with the instructor and with each other). Research indicates that a distributed or blended learning model, one that combines face-to-face and online interactions, has the most impact on student achievement (Dean, Stahl, Sylwester, & Peat, 2001).

Among the leading Web-based technologies utilized to facilitate the design, development, and delivery of distributed course events in schools, corporate training, and higher education contexts are CMS or learning management systems (LMS), defined in the preface of this book. According to Harasim (1999), the goal of a Web-based authoring system such as CMS or LMS is “to
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